

**MADRIGAL  
TO  
DIRGE  
THE CASE OF KOVALAM**



**T.G. JACOB**



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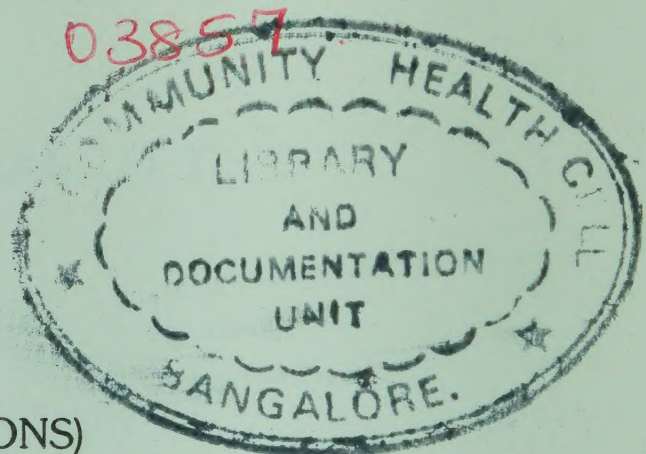
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***T.G. Jacob***

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Many friends in Kovalam gave their time for discussions on the questions raised in this monograph, among whom the names of my artist friends, G. Sunil Kumar and Pradeep Chandra Kumar stands out.



## Contents

1. Introduction
2. An outline of Kovalam in the past
3. Composition of Tourists
4. Racism
5. Prostitution : Varied Forms
6. Drugs in Kovalam
7. Cleaning up the Beach, Kovalam style
8. What happened to the Traditional Occupations?
9. Living standards, an obscene contrast
10. Environmental Devastation
11. Exclusiveness, a political question
12. Linguistic corruption and history writing for tourists
13. Foreign Exchange and tourism
14. Some broader questions



## Introduction

Kerala is presently being swept away in what can be called a “tourism wave”. From one end of the state to the other and from west to east any number of proposed tourism promotion projects are being bandied about. District Tourism Promotion Councils (DTPC) are formed in all the districts under full governmental patronage with the proclaimed objective of “decentralising” and “democratising” tourism promotion activities. Calls are frequently heard from those in power exhorting the people at large to make tourism a “mass movement”. Every hill and dale, every forest, every beach and spot of water is deemed fit for attracting foreign tourists and tremendous tax concessions are offered to private service sector business to actively participate in this “mass movement”. Colourful brochures are released at the district level itself apart from costly productions of state level importance. The governmental plans seems to be revolving around a few nodal points of tourist attraction (e.g. Kovalam, Agasthyakootam, Varkala, Thekkadi, Kochi, Kappad and Bakel) where big infrastructural facilities are proposed to be built up and around which there will be large number of smaller tourist attractions. In short, the whole state is proposed to be covered by various tourist spots.

Bureaucratically many infrastructural preparations are already made. These consists of a ministry, now headed by the chief minister a full governmental department with a secretary, special secretary, and numerous other middle level and junior officials, the Kerala Tourism Development Corporation (KTDC) with a chairman and secretary at the head, DTPCs in all the districts, two educational and training centres for meeting man power needs of the tourism industry, and various local level unofficial committees acting as political pressure groups for bringing tourism development projects into their own specific villages or areas. Pilgrimage centres like *Sabarimala* which are already facing degradation due to the massive influx of domestic pilgrim tourists are now earmarked for massive deforestation and construction of concrete jungles in the place of evergreen tropical forests and grass lands.



Of late, international commercial tourism is being subjected to more and more studies. The economics of tourism industry, considered to be the fastest growing industry in the world, is getting increased attention. The cultural and environmental aspects of commercial tourism, especially selling third world locations to the foreigners as touristic commodities, is also being focussed upon. It is surprising that the euphoria being currently built up in Kerala around tourism development is going unchallenged to a significant extent though on the global level the negative impact of commercial tourism upon the lands and peoples is no longer a secret.

The government is simply determined to push through the tourism promotion projects by any means because, in their opinion, this is the most suitable industry for Kerala and moreover, there is no other way out from the present stagnation prevailing in the economy. They hold that commercial tourism will solve a host of serious problems including unemployment. Mountainous areas which are now fairly inaccessible will become accessible with the opening up of roads, ropeways etc. and this will boost the development of such "backward" areas. These claims of the government are meant to influence the local people who had been generally agitating for facilities like roads and electricity for many long years with no serious results. Now they are promised all these and more if international tourists are brought there.

Internationally, West Europe remains the single biggest bloc as a tourist attraction. The share of the Third World in terms of international tourist arrivals is still very low when compared to Western Europe but the current trend is that the share of the Third World is an increasing one and the rate of increase has become a significant variable. It is in this international background that Kerala, a small state with a long coastline and criss crossed with backwaters and forty six rivers and waterfalls is planning to enter the world tourist map in a big way. For the policy makers and political leadership this is going to open up a golden age in Kerala. The number and quality of distortions, half truths and unrealistic claims handed down by those in power and economic interest groups having a stake in the



development of tourism is a little too many and alarming in nature. Again, it is surprising that no powerful response is emerging in the face of these false assertions particularly when there is the example of Kovalam as a well known and established tourist resort right in front of you.

International tourism is an important political question for the Third World countries and as a development model for them it raises unsavoury facts. Any decision to convert Kerala into a tourism dependent and oriented entity has to be viewed with utmost gravity because the results of developing an entire state into a tourist commodity can be very long standing and serious.

Our purpose in preparing the present report on Kovalam is to help in locating the tourism question in its proper perspective through trying the best to be objective to the core. Present day Kovalam can easily become tomorrow's Agasthyakootam or Bakel or Vaithalmala. So we thought it useful to give an account of what are the present conditions existing in Kovalam so that the people themselves can decide whether tourism is going to be their fate. At least, we hope that this report can enable discussions on a wider and fruitful level and thus help in crystalizing an approach to the "tourism model of development".

We also see a basic difference between a traveller and a commercial tourist. Whenever and wherever we are talking about tourists, the increasingly becoming rare species of travellers are certainly excluded.

## **An Outline of Kovalam in the Past**

Presently Kovalam is the only developed tourist enclave in Kerala, a centre of both domestic and international commercial mass tourism. It is the foreigners who converted this coastal village into a tourist centre, domestic tourism being primarily only an offshoot of international tourism. As is the case with Goa, the European "flower children" of the 60s "discovered" Kovalam in their scavenging of the Third World for cheap drugs and



permissive living. Within a period of twenty five years this tiny village in the southernmost part of Kerala has emerged as one of the important international tourist centres in India attracting more than 65,000 foreign tourists every season. Some of them, though few, stay there all through and many years. A good number are regular visitors.

The less than three decades history of Kovalam as a touristic commodity has changed the social, economic and political dynamics of this paragon of a village in an irretrievable manner. Hence it is but natural that any serious investigation into the desirability or undesirability of tourism industry as a developmental panacea for Kerala should first analyse, or at least account, the changes that have happened in this village. The necessity is very pressing because the state and central governments, as is evident from their policy statements, are determined on converting the whole state into a "tourist paradise". An investigation of Kovalam can be very revealing. All the parametres cited by the central and state governments as reasons for developing the tourism industry can be seen full blown in Kovalam.

Thirty years back Kovalam could be called a coconut village. Sturdy disease resistant coconut trees grew dense and tall here. Planting and tending the trees, plucking the nuts and extracting toddy, processing the nuts into copra and oil, manufacturing of yarn and coir from the husk, and trading of these various products constituted the single biggest bloc of economic activity. The coconut related people included the small and medium landowners, wage labour and household labour in the tending, plucking, processing, toddy tapping, yarn making, coir weaving and transportation activities. The scope for developing coconut based small industries of both household and factory varieties was very much there and the village society on its own was gradually evolving towards a base of value adding economy. It was in this background that the hippies struck their paradise in the mid '60s.



In Goa also similar tourism struck during the same time, if not a bit earlier. The nature of the beaches and terrain has many similarities. But there are serious differences in the political history. Significant intermixing of the Portuguese colonialists with the people occurred in the coastal areas of Goa which also underwent a much longer period of direct colonial rule than the rest of India. Travancore was a princely state under British sovereignty. Coastal Goa became predominantly catholic while Kovalam remained tradition bound though the dominant community, *Ezhavas*, are in general known for their social reformist origins and motivations. Households remained heavily interrelated so as to make almost a clan concept relevant. Family temples and community temples in which rebellious Gods and Goddesses, sometime characterized as devils, are given near status as the mainstream deities like Kali and Ganapathi remains in vogue. This was the cultural identity that was invaded by the hippies in the mid '60s.

Fishing in Kovalam remains a marginal economic activity in striking contrast to Vizhinjam, a bustling fishing village just 2 km away. But the little fish caught in Kovalam is considered to be of superior quality due to its more attractive taste said to be caused by the rock formations in the sea. It is universally recognised in the area that the fish that live in the crevices of the rocks are superior in quality. Moreover it was an absolutely unpolluted water.

The total geographical formation of this area is itself fascinating. A huge rock formation forming into hills and ravines with a slender layer of top soil in general. The rock here is known as *Krishna Shila* and is blue green in colour with very fine texture. Similar rock was used to sculpt the famous Konarak Wheel. This rock formation stretches far out into the sea with outposts at varying distances from the coast. It is these rocky outposts that makes the sea calm and safe except during the heavy monsoons. The environmental setup of Kovalam consists of lush green vegetation growing on a thin, highly fertile layer of top soil on a rocky table of crazy pattern cuddled by a sea never too violent. The acute unevenness of this rock table provides a land of great fertility eminently suited for crops like coconut



trees whose roots are capable of penetrating into even the smallest crevices. It is a very fragile and great terrain.

Politically the most striking feature was the active presence of local power rooted in the local economy and social moorings. The forms of organisations were political parties, community bodies and local bodies like *Panchayat*. In the past there were instances of the *Panchayat* chastising police officials and bureaucrats with tyrannical tendencies. After the influx of tourists started there were successful struggles launched against nudism on the beach, prostitution and drug abuse. The situation is drastically different now. In the past local bodies could by and large check the excesses of the executive and mobilise the people against evils like prostitution.

Accumulation of capital was occurring in a locally based manner through trading and other activities relating to coconut. Trader capitalists had already emerged by the mid '60s. This period also witnessed the break up of the joint family system. This village of around 2000 households was well in contact with the main centres of commercial and industrial activity in Southern Kerala like *Kollam* and *Alapuzha* through trading of copra, oil and coir yarn products. Transportation was mainly using boats. Huge country boats known as *Kettu Vallams* which could carry upto twenty truckloads at one go were in operation. It was also catering to the coir demands from the fishing sector in the villages like *Vizhinjam*. Fishing sector needs big quantities of coir and *Kovalam* could have without difficulty developed into the main supplier in this local market.

## **Composition of Tourists**

Initially the tourists straggling in stayed with the local households with minimal expenditure incurring to them, communicating with the simple fisherfolk in their own backpacker style. *Ganja*, a light and pleasant herb grown abundantly in the highlands is smoked by many *Malayalees* besides being used in the preparation of many traditional Ayurvedic medicines. It used to be incredibly cheap and the hippies with their thin purses found



Kovalam a "Paradise". Cheap good food, cheap lodging, cheap liquor and cheap drugs. From their side hard chemical drugs like LSD and heroin were introduced. Soon after this "discovery" Kovalam was catapulted into the world tourist map and it became a question of pride for "sensitised" young Europeans visiting India to drop in. It was then that the government, central and state, decided to intervene with the goal of reaping foreign exchange from the expanding tourist trade which promised further prospects. A five star hotel (Ashok Beach Resort) was opened by the ITDC and then a three star one was opened by the KTDC. The beach strip in front of Ashok hotel became a segregated one for all practical purposes. Five star tourism was thus superimposed on Kovalam. And it is interesting to note that this sprawling resort complex was an erstwhile palace of the Travancore kings with the addition of hundreds of acres of rich coconut land surrounding it.

Meanwhile, by 1987, the foreign tourist inflow had crossed 50,000 a season ( the season is from October to April) and Kerala became the place for the longest duration stay. The beach had become a teeming bazaar for food, drinks, drugs and the usual exotics for sale. Dozens of Kashmiri traders with their families established themselves as sellers of carpets etc. Their presence has of late become a politically sensitive issue with the BJP forming a *Theeradesa Samrakshana Sena* (Coastal Protection Army) and propagating that Kovalam beach has become a hideout of Kashmiri militants.

Several rallies and meetings raising highly provocative slogans have been conducted. Other political parties are yet to react to this new development. Besides the Kashmiris, Punjabis, Sindhis and many Bombay based businessmen and groups are also buying up real estate in and around Kovalam . The result of this buying spree is that land prices have steeply shot up and Kovalam is fast going out of the hands of the people of that area.

The backpackers continue to be the dominant section of tourists with a



segregated elite group in their midst. UK, Germany and France continue to be the main suppliers though of late Australians are also coming in good numbers. Americans are yet to make a serious entry into Kovalam. So is the case with the Japanese. Kovalam remains by and large a West European enclave. A very interesting pattern can be observed in the composition of tourists coming to Kovalam. Those who stay for the longest time there are invariably the tourists belonging to the lowest economic decile and they tend to concentrate there towards the end of the season when it is quite hot. The peak tourist arrival time is December-January which is also the time when the richer tourists make their appearance. The beginning and end of the season is marked by low budget tourists while the middle is marked by both low and high budget ones. The variations in the prices of drugs is a reliable index. The fluctuations in drug prices conforms to the changes in the economic status of the arrivals.

Interestingly the ITDC hotel houses more Indians than foreigners. Top bureaucrats, politicians and businessmen seems to like the place very much probably because this is the only five star hotel in *Thiruvananthapuram*. Meanwhile several exclusive high cost (often much higher than five star rates) resorts have started coming up. These are small establishments in terms of the number of suites but luxurious in all possible manner with well protected exclusive big land areas. And these resorts claim an ethnic touch too. They abound with sculptures and other art work made to look like belonging to a bygone era and in some cases the structures themselves are made predominantly with dismantled palaces and feudal mansions.

These resorts (which the proprietors would very much like to be known as belonging to the category of "ethnic" tourism) operate exclusively for foreigners and are often initiated and financially backed by some foreigner. Surya Samudra hotel, away from the hassles of Kovalam is one such venture. Most of these resorts ( and those that are coming up also) are quite far from Kovalam, (some as far as 12 km) which means that what started as hippies in a small village beach now encompasses a very large area and



penetrating into more and more villages. The trend is that this sort of exclusive high cost setups are on a steadily climbing curve.

Several small hoteliers are now becoming real estate agents for foreigners. The foreigners advance money to construct cottages on the beach land. The hoteliers sign an agreement(s) with them and look after their stay. The profit of the hotelier mainly comes from the discrepancy between the amount of money advanced and the money actually used for the land and construction, and advantages from keeping the place in custody when the owner is not in the country. The FERA deregulations implemented by the central government gives these agreements a legal status. This is on an upward trend.

As a focus for internal tourism Kovalam was never very famous because apart from the facilities for sun bathing and sea bathing there were no additional attractions for the average Indian tourist who mainly used to look for centres of religious importance. In any case sun bathing etc. are irrelevant for those who live in tropical conditions. But with the Hawva (Eve) beach (*Avad Thurai* was renamed by the tourists as *Hawva* beach and the new name has got stuck, thanks to the efforts of the media) becoming famous for nudity the flow of domestic tourists picked up. There is no exact data on their numbers because no one keeps any account. But even to a casual observer it is evident that their numbers come to several thousands a day during the peak season. Except very few they seldom stay overnight. Often what you find is that busloads and car loads keep on dropping in, spend an hour or so looking around the beach, wet their feet in the sea water and pack back leaving inorganic and organic waste behind. A few years back there was popular resentment against these tourists, to prevent them from shitting on the rocks. Using these rocks as latrines remains a real menace to the place.

Voyeurism is an important aspect attracting domestic tourists. Bands of youth roaming on the beach ogling at the white skin is a common sight. It is a sickening scene and this points out a more sinister dimension to



internal tourism in Kovalam. The very fact that the white man and woman finds the place good and attractive is enough to attract domestic tourists. The colonial and subsequently neocolonial value systems play a significant role. It is part of the consumerist value system and the media, both printed and visual, see to it that we follow the tracks of the white man to be known as "modern". In Kovalam you can even see the live representatives bare at close quarters! Kerala society with a strong consumerist orientation is certainly very receptive to the images projected by the media on the glory of western societies, men and women enveloped by the glittering consumerist halo.

## **Racism**

Under the given conditions the exhibition of rampant racism is nothing very astounding. Throwing chappals at the poor local children is a common enough sight on the beach. These children might be either asking for alms, trying to sell something like peanuts or small trinkets, or might have just come to have closer look at the bare white skin.

The point of view of the average tourist is simple enough. He is a superior being, otherwise he won't be here in the first place. He or she is an honoured guest because it is the Indian government that is begging for dollars so much necessary for its existence and survival. The average tourist is trained and conditioned to see this country as a country of beggars and crooks who are out to cheat them of money at every chance. He or she may be a hairdresser or sales girl/boy back home. The exchange rate is such that on one month's earnings back home such a tourist can live like a *Sultan* for four months in Kovalam. What more you need? The place is there to be consumed, the people are there to be ordered about. Kovalam as a touristic commodity is only that.

Even an environment friendly tourist from West Europe does not seem to be aware of the fact that environment friendliness ought to be global. That they have no right to consider any place as something to be consumed and



left a waste. They are often found to be West Europeans who are aware of their environmental rights, but it stops short of the frontiers. Being a tourist he or she is part of the entire vicious mechanism of inequality and perpetuation of inequality. It is simply illogical to be environmentally friendly here as you are in your own country. You are free to do everything that you are not supposed to do on your own beaches and mountains. That is why you are a commercial tourist, not a traveller who has very different perceptions on travelling.

The racism that is found on the Kovalam beach is multidimensional. The most visible is the economics of it. The tourists know it rightly that those who are at their beck and call are out to make easy money and once that becomes the overriding passion of life the fellow is ready to stoop to any level. That is one of the satisfaction of the average tourist and, why not, when he is ready to pay for it and his money is extra precious to those in power.

A sample survey on the racial attitudes of western tourists in Kovalam points the accusing finger at the English people. Americans coming here are few in number and the biggest chunk of tourists (above 20% of the total) are English. In the opinion of the restaurant owners, shop keepers, waiters (all in smaller establishments) they are the most blatantly racist in contrast to those from countries like Spain, Italy and France who are considered more open minded and humane. A good number of English, in the opinion of many local people who constantly interact with tourists, seems to be suffering from the malady of lost glory and pining for their lost empire. May be because the predecessors of these tourists overlorded this subcontinent for centuries they hold it as their legitimate right that theirs is the role to command and any equality between the hosts and guests is a blasphemy.

According to the victims racism is apparent in their every action, from the manner of ordering for a glass of tea to a permanent disdainful, arrogant look fixed on their faces when they come into contact with the people.



It is a common practice to entertain the tourists with local art forms. This is particularly striking during the *Onam* festival (the national festival of Kerala) when an entire week is celebrated officially as “tourism week”. During these days artists practicing indigenous art forms which are rooted in the culture of the people since antiquity are brought to the cities and paraded before the tourists who gape at them with unconcealed glee and clique away to their heart’s content. The majority of these tourists do not understand even an iota of what these art forms mean and some tourists themselves openly admit that they never knew that there can be such “primitive” art forms in this “modern” world. Indirectly what this means is that viewing these art presentations is a means for them to indulge in self praise on how advanced they are when compared to these savages. Viewing these people’s art forms and seeing these artists themselves, particularly if they happen to be tribals, makes them very proud of their own stage of development which goes well in hand with their superior economic standards.

## **Prostitution: Varied Forms**

Tourist enclaves in the Third World are generally well known as big centres of female, male and child prostitution. Several reports on the tourist centres in South and Southeast Asia clearly substantiate this point. Recent newspaper reports on Goa also points this out. But nothing much has come out on this aspect of tourism in Kovalam.

Flesh trade in Kovalam is mainly of three distinct kinds. The first and second variety are older in their history while the third is relatively new. The first kind is concerning female prostitution and though it does not concern the foreign tourists so much its origin and growth is due to the metamorphosis of Kovalam into a tourist enclave. The erstwhile *Avad Thurai* is famous as a nude/semi nude beach and as said earlier this is a great attraction for the youth to flock there during the season. It has got the established name that everything is possible and available here. Even as back as the early ‘70s specialised hotels with all facilities came up as well



known brothels. Affluent youth from all over the state, and even from outside, come here looking for fun. In these specialised hotels there is always a ready stock of young girls brought from different parts of the state, and even from outside, to practice flesh trade.

The second type of prostitution is also female prostitution but it is well hidden as it concerns foreigners only. Prostitutes from other countries come here during the season to practice their trade either by prior assignation or freelancing. As such very few of them practice their trade outside the circuit of foreigners (it is not as exclusive as it used to be earlier) and hence it is possible for this sort of prostitution to remain hidden to a large extent. But it can't be hidden from waiters and hotel owners. They are a sort of international prostitutes who shift from one place to another according to trade conveniences .

The third kind of prostitution here is male prostitution and is relatively lesser known and the participants are also different. Middle aged women tourists look around for sex here. And more than 50% of the tourists are women and good number among them unattached. Restaurant waiters, owners, fairly well off drug pushers, guides etc are their clients. There are many examples of local youth striking it rich within a few years after getting into such attachments. It is a purely commercial deal with many examples of tourists financing such youth to buy real estate and start own businesses. They become rich within a remarkably short time. Though this sort of flesh trade is euphemistically called as having an Indian boy friend or a white girl friend it is nothing but flesh trade. It is worthwhile to note that most of these professional lovers are men with family and children of their own. Generally this male prostitution is done with the knowledge of family members. One such wife told this writer when asked about her husband; 'children's father has gone for romancing'. They have become collaborators due to the lure of easy money.

These male prostitutes are often dealers in drugs also. The advantage for the customers is that they get everything they want in one place. The white



sands are there for sun bathing, the sea is there for sea bathing, good rich marine food is available at relatively low prices, sex is at your command, and hallucinatory drugs are freely and safely available to heighten the pleasure. The situation is extremely dangerous, epidemics of killer diseases like AIDS are very much a possibility in Kovalam and subsequently devastate a much bigger population and area.

The notoriety of Kovalam as a centre of prostitution is such that outsiders are increasingly becoming unwilling to enter into marriage alliances with the locals. This is particularly affecting the girls. In the opinion of one old local resident the people of Kovalam will have to denounce their place of birth if they want their girls to be married off. Looking at a young white man going around the backyard of a house almost naked, he angrily added: "the bastards who make money from them will have to pay for it. I have no problem. All my daughters are safely married out."

## **Drugs in Kovalam**

Kovalam is now a developed drug market. Of course, no clear empirical data on the exact magnitude of this market is possible because of the strictly underworld character of it. But there are many visible dens where tourists sit in groups and smoke away and any number of pushers can be seen on the beach soliciting customers. The commonly available drugs are ganja, ganja oil and other ganja products, charas, charas oil, LSD and heroin/smack. The high lands of Kerala grow a variety of high quality ganja which has many medicinal properties and uses. Most of these varieties are what is called "soft" drug though there are some deadly ones like "mad grass". Ganja is bulky in nature and hence the value adding process of extracting the oil and packing it in ampules or plastic straws so that transportation becomes easier and safer.

It is also reported that there are mini factories operating in the deep jungles of Idukki district in the high ranges where experiments are made to manufacture highly potent ganja products by combining it with toxic



chemicals. The government is fully aware of what is happening as is evident from many newspaper reports charging active complicity of senior excise officials in ganja cultivation and marketing. One of the persons arrested in connection with a Rs.67 Lakh heroin haul in Thiruvananthapuram a few days before the 1994 New Year (the consignment was obviously meant for sale during the New Year festivities in Kovalam) was a police official. The Malayalam media has done extensive reporting on the police-drug mafia nexus in Kerala. Periodic raids, arrests, confiscations are considered necessary for the keeping up of a false public image, profit level, and smooth functioning of the market as a whole.

The demand for drugs is fabulous in Kovalam and the profit margin so high that in this land of chronic unemployment it is not surprising to find that many youth find it alluring to make quick money through drug trading. Presently there are at least thirty youngsters (including women) from this small place who are in the jail undergoing rigorous imprisonment for 10-14 years on charges of drug trafficking. These youth are from poor background and are by no means the main operators. They are in the jails because they were unable to raise the huge bribes necessary to slip out of the clutches of the law and order authorities. The situation is such that those who can pay can conduct the trade with ease, but those who want to make quick money without sufficient liquid cash to get out of a possible fix can cool their heels in the stocks.

There is stiff competition among restaurant and hotel owners for customers and one of the baits to attract them is the ready availability of drugs. The result is that every restaurant and hotel is forced to push drugs or at least be in spot contact with pushers so that they can at any time procure the necessary drugs. But then the profit rate becomes lower if you use an intermediary on the beach, hence they find it much better to push it themselves. Restaurant owners admit that it is almost impossible to conduct business profitably unless they make available a sufficient quantity and variety of drugs. Drugs have become firmly institutionalised into the structure of commercial tourism in Kovalam.



There is another aspect to the drug problem here. The number of smack addicts is alarmingly growing among the local youth. Even a casual walk on the beach covering the shady nooks and corners will show you any number of bleary eyed smack addicts hanging around soliciting white customers. One young tourist from West Europe told this writer that within an hour of his reaching Kovalam he was accosted by more than half a dozen local youth offering for sale nine different kinds of drugs. The ground level pushers are invariably addicts and it is a vicious circle once anyone becomes a pusher. Unlike ganja, drugs like smack are both physically and psychologically addictive and the present cost is Rs.25 per trip. An addict needs a minimum of four trips a day. How else he can make enough money for his own trips except by pushing drugs?

Tourists will go when the season ends leaving behind an ever growing number of insensitive, useless drug addicts. Mind you, this place used to be a politically sensitive spot at one time. There is little wonder that the number of exposed and unexposed crimes are steeply increasing.

It is quite amazing to note that not even a single white tourist is in jail for drug offenses though those who are aware of the history of the drug question in Kovalam know it pretty well that they are in the field not only as consumers but dealers also. Many tourists bring in drugs that are not available here (like LSD, smack and charas) and use the local boys to push them. In fact the introduction of addictive hard drugs like smack was originally done by them way back in the late '60s and '70s which puts the blame for the growing drug menace in Kovalam squarely on the tourism industry.

The government's attitude to the drug question in Kovalam is a Janus faced one. They know it fully well that if there are no drugs available (like if they effectively ban nudity) the tourists will certainly allege harassment and move away to other pastures which means loss of foreign exchange. And for the police it means a great loss of hush money. Both are unpleasant for them and so, while on the one hand loudly pontificating against the



growing currency of drugs, calmly shut their eyes to the reality. To keep up appearances there are strict laws enacted to prevent drug trafficking which acts as a boon to the law enforcing authorities. Often the small time pushers are made the scapegoats.

## **Cleaning up the Beach, Kovalam style**

Like the hypocritical attitude and policy towards the drug question we can see double dealing on many other issues. Let us cite two contrasting spectacles on the beach, this time concerning the much clamoured about issue of cleaning up the beach.

On the beach strip near the lighthouse on Hawva beach one can see a small group of men, women and children huddled together in the rain and sun, day and night. They are agitating for compensation from the Government.

In September 1993 hundreds of cops descended on the beach without any warning to “clean” up the beach of “unauthorised” constructions. This force was led by the district collector and senior police officers. About 65 commercial establishments were razed to the ground without giving any time to the occupants to remove their meagre belongings. Several of these establishments were commercial-cum-residential units and many among them had nothing else in their life and were occupying these shacks for decades. Those who have nowhere else to go are still on the beach agitating for alternate accommodation. Six months are over with no consolation for the victims of this “clean up”.

The boundary between public/state and private property is very vague on the beach and if one goes by occupancy rights the government has done a high handed, arbitrary action. The massive propaganda given for these demolitions was that it was a must because it was these people who were making the beach filthy and they lack any valid legal documents to prove ownership. But the beach remains as filthy as ever. A more plausible reason cited for this operation is that the relatively bigger and moneyed establishments behind these shacks did not want them to ruin the view and



approach to the water, so they bribed the district administration and police to destroy them. Another reason may be that these small shacks were taking away a slice of the cake which should have gone to the bigger establishments, particularly in the trading of beer and drugs. Whatever are the real reasons behind the demolitions the declared objective of cleaning the beach was not the reason. This is so because removing a few dozen shacks can by no means clean the beach. The reasons why the beach is filthy are very different and addressing these real reasons will invariably point out the entire tourism industry as the culprit.

About half-a-km away on the beach there is a curious sight. Near the KTDC owned Hotel Samudra there is a huge dilapidated twisted concrete structure sprawling on the beach for more than 200 metres. It is the remains of what was planned and constructed as a luxury hotel.

Ten years ago some underworld gambling dons from Bombay came with a project to build a 200 room luxury hotel on the beach for which they managed loans to the tune of crores from foreign banks. They purchased a narrow strip of land along the beach, heavily encroached into the beach and started construction. The concrete skeleton was built upto two floors but they vanished suddenly with the huge amounts taken from the banks. The whole structure was erected in violation of all rules and regulations as it was on the beach itself. During the high tide time the sea cleared the place as much as it could by crashing it to the ground. Of course the construction was deliberately shoddy. Later it came to be known that the firm was a fictitious one and they planned and executed this wild project with the sole objective of cheating the banks. No one knows who they are and where they are now. The government made no efforts to trace these crooks or at least to get this eyesore removed from the beach.

## **What happened to the Traditional Occupations?**

The traditionally important occupations of the people of Kovalam, as mentioned earlier, were coconut related: Coconut cultivation, plucking of



the nuts and extraction of toddy, processing the nuts into copra and oil, processing the husk into yarn, coir and coir products, limited amount of fishing, limited amount of granite quarrying, and transportation of all these products to the nearby markets. Now the situation has radically changed.

To understand the change in the composition of employment in Kovalam it is necessary to look at the uses to which land, the principal means of production in the areas, is put. There is a sea change in the land prices of today and, say, ten years back. Even a modest estimate puts the increase in land prices at 1000%, a ten times increase within the last ten years. A cent (one hundredth of an acre) of land in the beach area now costs at least Rs.1 lakh. As the tourism industry is geographically spreading interior land with approach facility is now costing around Rs.50,000 per one cent. Actually it has become a seller's market. There are any number of buyers desperately looking for prime land at any price.

The land prices have by no means attained a plateau. The rate of increase is an ever growing trend. This has particularly become so within the last five years. The entry of outside business interests into the land market is responsible for this trend to a considerable degree. What this trend point at is that it is now only a question of a little time before the original inhabitants of this place, excepting the few who have already made it big in the tourism industry, will be alienated from land en masse. This has already become so in the vicinity of the beach.

The most important aspect of this phenomenal increase in land prices is that the emphasis on productive uses of land has suffered a serious and permanent setback. Land as such has got predominantly speculative value now and this displaces thousands of people from productive occupations. Coconut and related occupations have become the worst casualty. A productive activity which had so much possibility for growth and modernisation due to the good demand from the fishing sector and plentiful availability of raw materials in the area has suffered horribly due to the de-emphasis in the cultivation of coconut trees. The tourism sector



does not come anywhere near meeting this displacement of productive labour. Better jobs in the tourism sector goes to the better educated outsiders and what is left to the local youth is the job of drug peddling, low class servants etc. Even in these occupations there are good number of outsiders.

At the same time the weakening of the coconut sector in terms of production and employment is being compensated by the granite quarries and related work. The whole area (Kovalam and the neighboring villages) abounds with high quality, relatively costlier Krishna Shila which has a growing demand. Men are employed in the blasting and transporting work while women and children are employed in breaking the huge pieces into different small sizes for use in concrete making. In this rock belt at least ten thousand people are employed in this work, the vast majority being women and children. Contractors employ them on piece rates and on an average a healthy woman worker earns Rs. 20-25 for a full day's back breaking labour by the street side. Anyone going to Kovalam can't miss the sight of kilometers after kilometers of roadside occupied by women and children breaking granite with hammer, whether it is scorching sun or rain. Children from the age of ten or even less to women of seventy years can be seen toiling from morning to night in this work. When compared to the daily wages of agricultural labourers in Kerala they get only a pittance.

The deep quarries as well as the women and children squatting by the roadside wielding hammers also has become a tourist attraction. It looks like that for the average tourist poverty is very much a saleable commodity. Apart from the environmental disaster that the creation of numerous deep quarries are ushering in, this legal and illegal mining reduces agricultural land considerably. An acre of land leased out for granite quarrying gets you a down payment of minimum Rs.50,000 and in the present economic dynamics of Kovalam ready cash is what is desirable, not a steady and continuous flow of income from productive use of land. The result is the permanent loss of land and the creation of ugly deep pits in its place.



## **Living Standards, an Obscene Contrast**

Nowhere else in Kerala one can witness such acute disparities in living standards as in Kovalam and neighbouring villages. On the one extreme you can see thousands of tourists massed in a small area hogging like mad on all the good things of the land and water. Tropical fruits, tender coconuts, the better quality fish, king prawns, lobsters, beer etc form the standard fare of the average tourist and the majority of them eat in public in the beachside restaurants. Papaya and pineapple are favourite fruits among them mainly because they are good digestive agents however much you stuff your belly. In Kovalam there are hundreds of restaurants which offer the tourists whatever they can wish for and it is a real sickening sight to see the scene in contrast to the surroundings. Here we are not talking of the high budget, exclusive resorts that cater to the tourists, but to the restaurants that cater to the average tourists.

This vulgar opulence is going on in the midst of squalor, filth and malnutrition. Kovalam village itself is a stark contrast to the tourist paradise. There is not even a single restaurant in Kovalam proper (the beach is about a km away from the village center) that is even reasonably hygienic and offer decent food. The beach restaurants are frightfully expensive for the people which effectively debars them from entering these. But Vizhinjam, a big size fishing village about 2 km from Kovalam provides the most appalling contrast.

Vizhinjam, a very densely populated area flanked by Hawva beach on one side and exclusive tourist resorts on the other side, was a historic port with a lot of importance in the political history of Southern Kerala. About 3000 country boats (some of them mechanised) and rafts go out to the sea from here. Moreover during the peak seasons boats from other places come here for fishing. The fish caught here supplies the Thiruvananthapuram city and neighbouring areas apart from significant exports through Kochi and Thoothukkudi ports. There is no processing plant worth the name in such a big fishing area. The economy is backward in the sense that apart



from catching and bringing the catch to the shore there is no significant related value adding economic activity.

The government started constructing a fishing harbour here twenty years back with the objective of modernising and developing the fishing economy. Sufficient land was acquired and work proceeded to a near critical level, though slowly. Widespread allegations of corruption were raised at that time itself. At least Rs.250 million was spent on the project when all on a sudden the government decided to dump the project without giving reasons.

Last November the elaborate offices etc. were shifted from here. The same fate overtook the wave energy project which had proved a success after several crores were spent. The same government is talking of any number of crores to develop tourism in the same region.

Conditions of life in Vizhinjam are pathetic. There is no drinking water facility and to have a bath people have to take a bus to a six km away river. There is a dirty stream passing through this big village where huts are packed in like sardines. All the waste goes into this stream. There is absolutely no sewage facilities. The people are compelled to use this water for washing and sometimes even for cooking. During monsoons epidemics like cholera break out here with regularity resulting in high infant and child mortality. Educational and medical facilities are grossly insufficient, Vizhinjam is surrounded by pinnacles of luxury on all sides.

## **Environmental Devastation**

The granite quarries are the most irredeemable environmental devastation that has hit Kovalam. Some of the huge pits are as deep as 300 feet and cover large areas. This ongoing process of creating deep pits in a thickly populated area did not originate with tourism but got a great fillip due to tourism. Quarrying originated here almost 40 years back but was a small scale affair. The construction of the runway of the Thiruvananthapuram



airport made the first major inroad. Later when the fishing harbour project at Vizhinjam was started more and deeper pits were formed. During the '70s and '80s when commercial tourism picked up in a big way a construction boom became mandatory and this boom is continuing with no letup. It is all these factors together that made Kovalam into an environmental disaster with grave consequences for the land and the people.

Supposing that the authorities step in at this stage to ban the rock blasting (which they ought to have done long back) there is bound to be severe popular resistance from the workers. And this is due to the dislocation of the organic development of the place based on the environmentally safe exploitable resources available (as was occurring before the onset of the tourism industry). The maximum number of workers employed are in this sector and there is no alternative sources of employment. Tourism which is the only alternative present now does not provide it. In fact, Kovalam has emerged as the story of a place destroyed.

On the conditions existing on the beach during the tourist season the lesser said is better. The magnificent rock formations serve the convenient purpose of serving as huge public latrines. In the absence of any public toilet facilities there is no other way. A single rain wash down all the accumulated filth into the water polluting the sea. These rock formations which are so beautiful otherwise stink to high heavens and nobody seems to be responsible for their upkeep as even a moderately clean place. The mass media often realised the question of keeping the beach clean on the plea that in the long run tourists will desert the place if it continues to be filthy. They don't seem to be aware of the fact that it is the tourism industry itself that is responsible for the present state of affairs. Only when Kovalam became an international tourist spot the domestic tourists followed. It is unrealistic to shift the blame for the filth on to the domestic tourists. In the first place they won't be there if there are no foreigners showing all their assets on the beach.



Then what about the 200 odd restaurants and hotels cramped into a very limited space. The Kovalam beach is heavily overloaded with all these hotels and other shops and certainly this small place can't stand upto it. But here the overriding motive is profit and foreign exchange and any amount of overloading is alright as far as the authorities are concerned. About the beach, it simply can't stand all this filth, overcrowding and throwing around of plastic bottles and bags. It is in the order of things with international commercial tourism that once a place is converted into a cess pit it is abandoned for virgin pastures. Ultimately this is the fate that is going to overtake Hawva beach. The trend of having resorts away from Hawva beach is showing this logic.

If the plans of the government are pushed through commercial tourism is going to take a heavy toll as far a Kerala's environment is concerned. The idea of creating numerous hill resorts will be a heavy blow to the forests of the state which play the crucial role in keeping up the environmental and ecological balance of the place. It is quite revealing to note that one of the lobbies that is going all out for the promotion of hill tourism is the timber lobby who are eagerly waiting for pouncing on the trees. Construction of roads, tourist facilities like hotels necessitates clearing of forest land and this lobby's expectations are understandable. If projects like Agasthyakootam and Vaithalmala are implemented Kerala's environment is in for a severe degradation.

### **Exclusiveness, a political question**

Juridically speaking the beach is public property. It is a place where the children play their pretty games and people in general come to relax and enjoy the invigorating fresh air and sea water. It is the place where the productive activity of fishing is facilitated and boats are beached. It is the place where the fishing nets and other fishing gear are repaired. But as is shown by the case of Kovalam the situation drastically changes when it becomes an international tourist enclave. In the place where the children build sand castles and frolic in the shallow water you see scantily clad and



alien adults playing volley ball or lazing around. The place becomes effectively out of bounds for the common man. Added to this is the large inflow of domestic tourists who come and wet their feet in the sea water, ogle at the waves and white skins, make the place filthy and depart. But for the common man the beach is out of bounds. He can't afford to take a tea or cold drink because everything is sold at prices which are affordable to the tourists only. There is a growing aversion manifested among self respecting people preventing them from going to the Kovalam beach which makes the exclusiveness all the more poignant. An ordinary Malayalee feels uncomfortable there. This mental bloc helps the tourism industry which would like to see foreigners, and only foreigners on the beach. This is a serious political question.

In Kovalam even small restaurants do not welcome Indians unless they look sufficiently rich in terms of touristic standards. The waiters make you feel silly by their indifferent attitude in stark contrast to the utmost servitude in dancing attendance to the whites. They even laugh behind your back and pass nasty comments among themselves. This colonial deference is essentially based on the economics of commercial tourism and what it hits at is the self respect of a whole people. What you find is apartheid in its neocolonial form which is no better than its colonial predecessor. Those who are employed in the tourism sector takes it easy because of their monetary expectations. What about the others, the vast majority?

Kovalam is clearly showing a growing trend of this neocolonial exclusiveness. In the background of a general situation, when all the doors are opened wide for multinational capital and the control over the country's economics and politics by external agencies like the World Bank is becoming tighter, tourist enclaves are bound to be more and more exclusive, a process that vitally affects the political rights of the people. Special Tourism Area (STA) planned by the central government in different parts of the country (one of them is Bakel in the northernmost part of Kerala) are open declarations of this exclusiveness. But it is not necessary that a tourist area has to be an STA to be an exclusive enclave. Without being an STA Kovalam is



increasingly becoming an exclusive area where the freedom of the foreign tourist is boundless in inverse proportion to the freedom of the people. This has become the main characteristic of tourism planning.

The planned formation of STAs and the conversion of existing tourist areas into exclusive zones by the sheer force of market factors can't be reduced to one of the necessity of the government to garner additional foreign exchange from the growth of tourism industry alone. It has more sinister implications. As the 'liberalisation' and structural adjustment process gather momentum more and more foreign nationals representing business interests, governments, and international agencies will have to spend a significant part of their time here itself. If there are not enough holiday resorts with all required facilities (like in South East Asia) they will fly to where those facilities are available. This will obviously be taken as a symbol of inefficiency and lack of commitment of the national government. All these executives and the like can't be expected to be enamoured by Kasargod or Kanganad fish markets. What they want is their own zones for holidaying and that is why exclusiveness is the key word in tourism planning. It is determined by broader economic and political interests of neocolonialism.

## **Linguistic Corruption, History writing for Tourists**

There is a great fascination for English in Kovalam. And it is utter tragedy to listen to the sort of language the hawkers, the boys and girls who loaf around, guides, waiters, pushers etc use. Language is the quintessence of the people's culture and the Kerala government which is never tired of proclaiming the highest literacy rate is promoting illiteracy of a curious nature in Kovalam. These boys and girls who survive by serving the tourists have evolved their own 'language' which is neither English, Malayalam nor Tamil. It has absolutely no grammar, no syntax, and ridiculous. The tourists often enjoy this horror very much and by mimicking promotes and develops it. In fact, the hippies, because of their necessity to interact with the simple coastal people, enabled the growth of this vulgarity very much.



The old colonial butler's language had more cohesiveness because it was only English and the vernacular that mattered. But here a whole lot of foreign languages as well as Malayalam, Tamil and Hindi are involved. More and more children and youth are getting caught in this de-education process as the number of tourists increases. And this is having a demonstration effect too.

One can even find old people who don't know how to read and write Malayalam lamenting that if only they knew English they could have made it big! To become a taxi driver, an autorikshaw driver, drug pusher or even a beggar one has to practice this new butler's language. the language of an area is being steadily corrupted. This is a serious matter as it cuts the very roots of the national self respect of the people. We can laugh when we hear this atrocious matter but it is certainly not a matter for laughing. If this is the language that is engendered by interaction with tourists, it is nothing but a slave culture.

The number of school dropouts is an increasing phenomenon. Goa's experience is an important pointer. In the Goa University there are few takers for many post graduate courses. What the teachers say is that after joining the courses a good number of students drop out. Only if nothing lucrative comes their way or they are genuinely interested in higher studies and research there is persistence. In the department of Sociology there were instances when the number of teachers out numbered the number of students. The teachers coax the students to continue with their studies or at least keep themselves registered. It is a question of their livelihood. The lack of higher education among Goans is one major factor why people from other states come to constitute a significant share of the better paid, white collar jobs. This remains a political question in Goa which found open eruptions sometime back.

The trend of abandoning studies in the hope of making quick money has not caught up in Kerala in a big way only because commercial tourism is localised. Once it becomes state wide there is no reason to expect anything



different from the situation of Goa. To make money from the tourism industry you don't have to study anything in the proper sense of the term, not even language. One has only to pick up butler's language and cultivate an oily slave mentality. In the process one can easily become a drug addict too. In fact, there is a strongly positive correlation between the spread of drug addiction and the number of school and college drop outs, whether there is tourism or not. But as international tourism promotes drug addiction the correlation becomes direct.

The propaganda materials given out by the government of Kerala for tourist consumption presents another education campaign. One of the most popular books on Kerala among tourists is "Kerala -a Picture Book", the text of which is by Hugh and Colleen Gantzer, two prolific writers on tourism in India. This text, "Discovering Kerala" mainly deals with the history of the land and people with a heavily authentic tone and many sweeping assertions. This book, published by the Department of Tourism, Government of Kerala is, to put it mildly, a highly misleading work due to the large number of gross errors that fills it up.

This expensive, colourful book has numerous serious errors in every one of its 23 big size running matter pages. Here we are quoting only a few of them for reasons of space. About the European entry into the spices market of Kerala the authors say, ... and Portugal financed Vasco da Gama to discover the sea route to the spice land of Kerala, the Portuguese navigator made commercial contact with an Islamic ruler of northern Kerala; the Zamorin of Calicut". The Zamorin who was the only Brahmin King in the history of Kerala is a Muslim here. On page 10 there is another curious revelation. The authors assert that after 1947, communities "including the artistic Bengalis and ebullient Punjabis *began to make their presence felt in Kerala. They too, began to be merged great emulsifying process of this state*". (Emphasis ours) Malayalees are really not aware where in Kerala such an emulsifying process is happening. The only serious migration from other parts of India (the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu excluded) is from Gujarat and Rajasthan when traders came as early



as 300 years ago and established their own community organisations and settlements in trading centres like Kochi and Kozhikode. Bengalis and Punjabis like anyone else from any other part of India come here and stay for limited time periods necessitated by official postings, trade missions etc. or they come as tourists.

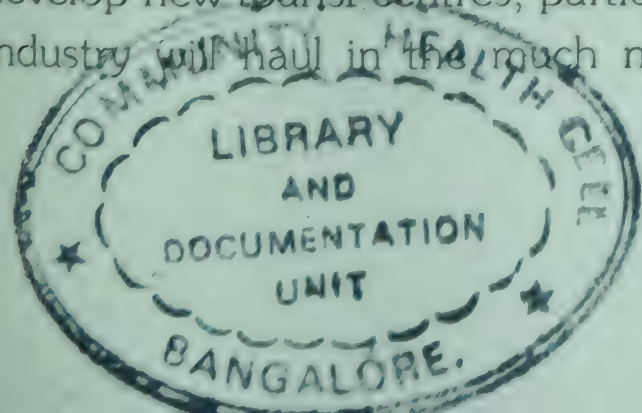
About the origin of the land, about women and their role in the society, about its educational system and literacy rate, about the migration to Gulf countries, about the festivals of the people, about the food habits of Malayalees, about the dances and crafts of Kerala, about the backwaters, coast and terrain in general, about the origin of the present inhabitants - on all these and more counts this book is one lump of a distortion. About women the authors indulge in particularly obnoxious assertions implying to the tourists that they are good 'commodities'.

After listing all these errors on glossy art paper the authors categorically assert that the most suitable industry for the state is commercial tourism. They have gone to great pains in the jugglery of history distortion to state this .

The minimum that the government can do to rectify the situation is the banning of such books and brochures and offer public corrections. The average tourist takes such books as his storehouse of information and is bound to propagate these errors back in his home country and wherever he goes. The damage can be considerable and the government ought to be a little considerate to the historical sense of the people. But the present attitude seems to be that anything will go as long as the goal is to promote the tourism industry.

## Foreign Exchange and Tourism

The most weighty reason for the central policy makers to identify and develop new tourist centres, particularly in South India, is that the tourism industry will haul in the much needed foreign exchange. Availability of





dollars (or any international hard currency) has become the pivotal question in economic crisis management in India. India has plummeted to the depths of being the second biggest debtor in the world and now advances are being taken from the international super banks to service the earlier loans, a sure mark of sliding into a chronic debt trap. The loss of foreign exchange through the loss of J & K to the tourism industry (Kashmir used to be the biggest tourism industry centre in India) is sought to be compensated by developing predominantly beach tourism in South India and Kerala is ticked as one of the main places to be developed as a touristic commodity. The relative political stability existing here, the composite character of Malayalee culture and its high level of tolerance, and the great natural advantages makes it an ideal place.

How much foreign exchange will remain at the disposal of the central government is a doubtful question, especially from mega projects like Golf courses and five star hotels. Leakages from the gross tourist receipts are found to be very significant. In 1980 it was found to be 35% in the case of the Carribbean and 51% in the case of South Korea. These leakages are mainly accounted for by import of food, beverages and others, import of machinery and equipments, payments to expatriates, management fees and amortization of foreign loans. Multinational hotel chains, international tour operators and international airlines companies swallow a good chunk of the income generated by the tourism industry. India is considered to be particularly backward in relation to the technology and management of huge tourist enclaves. India is entering late into the field when the multinationals are already in the commanding heights. The possibility is that the leakages from gross receipts might be higher than that of many other third world countries. And that is precisely what the World Bank knows also. Growth of tourism industry will be providing markets for foreign banks and multinational corporations in a big way. Profits are theirs to take. We are giving them space to play the profit game.

In any case what is the big linkage between the people of Bakel or Kovalam, or for that matter the Kerala state, to foreign exchange. The management



of foreign exchange is a highly centralised affair and the people have no participation or voice in its management. The people are not even aware how and to what purpose it is being used. Wrong priorities and economic policy which facilitated a neocolonial economic base has led to the foreign exchange crisis and now, managing this crisis has become the main component of total economic management. The way out for the planners and policy makers is to open all sectors wide and tourism is one avenue.

## **Some Broader Questions**

Big plans for the promotion of tourism industry are on the anvil. The process of land acquisition is on in Bakel. Bakel is earmarked as an STA. A number of smaller projects throughout Kerala are being taken up. Not only that, the local agents of the ruling sections are clamouring for every hill and every valley, every river and backwater to be made into a tourist area. The media is playing the game very well by putting out photographs of every place that looks attractive (which can mean all the places in Kerala) as places with tourist potential. Whether it is a hill or dale, river or even a small strip of water somewhere, everything is supposed to be an attraction for the whites. District Tourism Promotion Councils, Tourism special secretary, chief minister looking after tourism ministry, villages with greenery or water falls having its own tourism committees are in vogue. The whole scenario is absurdity par excellence. Going by the media projections a good number of Malayalees have to migrate so that every beautiful place can be made into tourist resorts. The golden age is round the corner, you only will have to grab it by offering your mother land.

It is not only the beaches and backwaters that are targetted but the mountains also. Agasthyakootam, an incredible garden of herbal flora and a much revered peak in south Kerala is destined for plastic bottles and shit. Unfortunately the whole state is composed of small or big mountains, valleys, rivers and lakes. No place seems to be safe.



Varkala, a pilgrimage centre and a beach with all the characteristics of Kovalam with the addition of an excellent mineral water spring is all set to become another Kovalam. Within the last couple of years the number of tourists increased at least five fold in Varkala. Where there was only a single shack restaurent now there are dozens of pucca ones. A five star hotel is also being constructed.

Going by the current pace of growth it may not even take ten years for Varkala to attain the mass tourism vulgarity level of Kovalam. It is connected by road and rail and an international airport is only an hour's ride. The Kerala goverment, a pauper who can't even keep the treasury open, is boldly talking in terms of thousands of crores to promote tourism. How exactly the financing of these mega projects is going to be done is still a mystery and no concerned authority is ready to divulge the details about projects like Bakel though there is no letup in tall claims.

From the government side the reasons advanced for promoting tourism are fairly simple. With all the migration to the Gulf countries and within India open unemployment is calculated at 2 million. Concealed unemployment and underemployment is statistically an unknown entity. As there is almost no yearly addition to employment every year hundreds of thousands are added to the rolls of the unemployed. Though Kerala is a resource rich state the level of industrialisation is abysmally low. And going by the existing pattern of industrialisation there is very little scope for significant absorption of the unemployed in productive activities, be it agricultural or industrial. The state government finds it difficult to pay salaries to its own employees and the major public sector undertakings like Transport Corporation and Electricity Board are in perpetual financial doldrums. Many are on the verge of liquidation. Kerala's resources, labour power included, are mainly exported. The utter panic that set in the wake of the Iraq-US war is symptomatic of the parasitic, dependent nature of the Kerala economy. Kerala is dependent on the outside for more than 60% of its food requirements and 90% of industrially produced consumer



goods. Consumption level of modern industrially produced consumer goods is high when compared to other parts of India which means that it is an excellent market for goods produced elsewhere. That is why Kochi has become a test market for the latest modern consumer goods including costly automobiles. What the whole situation shows is that in the existing scheme of geographical division of labour Kerala's role is as a supplier of raw materials and consumer of finished goods.

It is in this background of bankruptcy of the economy that commercial tourism is proclaimed as the solution for all the sicknesses of the economy. In fact, spokespersons of the government, like the KTDC chief, secretary of the department of tourism, or the chief minister states that international tourism is the only way out from the present despicable state of the economy. They promise sufficient employment and income generation, development of infrastructure and a higher standard of living for people in general besides serving the patriotic task of generating additional foreign exchange to help in ameliorating the balance of payments crisis plaguing the central government. This is a very surprising conclusion.

When critics pointed out through the mass media that international tourism ushers in degeneration of social life exemplified in drug addiction and prostitution and quoted the examples of South East Asia and Goa the proponents replied by saying that it may be so with other places, but in Kerala they know it better how to manage by eliminating the negative impacts of tourism industry. It seems that they have some unknown means to ensure a faultless tourism industry though no one is spelling out what these means are.

Kovalam gives the lie to such fancy claims in an unambiguous manner. For that matter we are yet to find a single tourist enclave in the whole of the Third World which is not a den of drug addiction, prostitution and mafias. If the advocates of tourism industry in Kerala are confident of steering clear of these evils which are endemic and an organic part of commercial tourism, well and good. Let us wish them all success. These claims are



obviously not worth pondering about when right under your nose, 12 km from the state secretariat, there is Kovalam, a thriving den of corruption and obscenity.

Leaving aside these whimsical, hypocritical assertions of the tourism planners and politicians let us see what is their right to assert that international commercial tourism is the only means to salvage and develop the Kerala economy. This is a blind assertion and is a far cry from the resource base of the state and the great possibilities of real economic development.

Let us take the micro example of Bakel. The entire Bakel area is rich in agriculture and at least openly visible unemployment is minimal. The area has good fishing, rice, coconut and tobacco cultivation besides a variety of smaller food crops. The area is a good foreign exchange earner through the export of labour to the Gulf countries and high cost marine products. This is the only place where tobacco is grown in Kerala and its quality is supposed to be very good. The tobacco grown here does not use chemical fertilisers and pesticides. Fish fulfills both the functions. This tobacco is exported to Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh where it is used as flavouring agent for snuff. In the absence of any local snuff making factory the farmers are forced to sell to monopoly buyers which gets them the same price as the inferior varieties (for snuff making) grown in Karnataka and AP. It is this land and water that is going to become an exclusive tourist resort. This obviously means the severe dislocation of an organically viable economic dynamics and its replacement by a totally alien one. The government is shouting hoarse about the Rs. 1000 crore that is going to be invested here in the tourism industry. In reality if even less than Rs. 1 crore is invested in a snuff manufacturing factory or a fish processing plant it can resolve whatever unemployment is there and trigger off a chain reaction of economic dynamics. The policy makers are either ignorant of this simple viable possibility or are just pretending. Twenty five years back the same was the situation in Kovalam. Now look at what has happened when it became a touristic commodity.



Kerala is undoubtedly rich in valuable resources. The state far outstrips other states in terms of the per acre value of agricultural output. The important plantation and other cash crops of Kerala are eminently suited for value adding process (in fact it is being done elsewhere) and this can be an effective means to check unemployment. But currently these products are exported and the value adding and employment generation is happening elsewhere. The educated and skilled youth of Kerala is a great resource but they are begging for employment elsewhere. All these resources can be tapped here itself if a realistic and self reliant economic policy is undertaken. Of course, when the state embarks on such a self reliant path broader political questions like the stumbling block of market fetters fastened by outside monopoly forces are bound to emerge. The thousands of crores that flow in from the Gulf region is either spent on conspicuous consumption or (and) sucked out through banks and stock markets. There is no move or wish from those in power to harness such a huge liquid financial resource. Credit-deposit ratio is one of the lowest in India. It is without considering these ground facts that the government is asserting that international mass tourism is the only way to proceed. In reality it is no way at all unless the path leads to an abyss.

It is not that all the possibilities of a self reliant economic development of the state were experimented and proved failures. The truth is otherwise. The high value-strategic mineral resources like monozite and ilmenite are mainly exported either in raw form or after minimal processing. The rich agricultural raw materials are mainly exported, and skilled labour power is also for export. The financial resources accumulated through these exports are simphoned off, whether it is through the goods market or through financial institutions. Very little is retained and invested at home. It is this vicious situation that has to change. Commercial tourism will be a tragedy without parallel worsening the already parasitic nature of the society.



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# Equations

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**Equitable Tourism Options (EQUATIONS)** seeks to situate the tourism critique within the overall development debate. Our activities include documentation, publication, research and supporting individuals and groups involved in concerted action on tourism concerns.